

*Government Orders*

Basically, for the purposes of the VIP, service on the high seas during these wars in the merchant navy is not considered equal to non-voluntary service even when such service was performed only on Canadian soil. Merchant seamen are instead categorized with all other non-service personnel under the title of civilians. The United Kingdom and the United States have legally recognized their merchant seamen as having served in active military service and they are entitled to equal benefits.

Do members of the Canadian merchant navy not deserve the same? I agree with the veterans organizations in saying yes, they do deserve our honour and our support for their sacrifices, and this should be clearly demonstrated by giving them full status under veterans' legislation.

Another group who served Canada, and for technical reasons do not receive the benefits they deserve, are those who at the end of World War II were absent without leave and never returned to their units. In 1946 an Order in Council categorized these veterans as deemed never to have served, which meant that while they would not suffer any consequences for the service offence, they were also deprived of any benefits provided for members of the Forces. This, in spite of the fact that many had good front line service records, and in some instances many were wounded in action.

We believe that a system should be established which would review the cases on an individual basis as requested by appellants. Individual cases could be investigated and when appropriate, honourable discharges could be granted. Veterans just want these cases to be judged on the individual merit by an easily understood and accessible system, such as a special committee. If a favourable decision is made, then such veterans or their dependants would be eligible for benefits.

Like the merchant seamen and others, there is another group of veterans whose experiences and special needs too often go unnoticed. I tell you that they receive full benefits, that they go unnoticed and yet they made a great sacrifice to the nation, and I am talking about the prisoners of war. We tend to forget what these people went through.

During the years which we like to consider as carefree in our teens and our twenties, Canada's service men and women experienced hell on earth. Because of this sacrifice, we live as free men and women in the greatest country in the world, and we are deeply in their debt. Veterans serve, not just as a living reminder of the wars fought for Canada, they remind us that we must do everything within our power to ensure that no Canadians ever again have to make such sacrifices if at all possible.

I would like to quote the Hon. Daniel J. MacDonald, a former Minister of Veterans Affairs, as he spoke to Bill C-40 in July, 1980. He said, and I quote: "In this modern age, society is often accused of neglecting both the contributions of our forebears in building this great country called Canada and their needs as they age and experience infirmity. It is often stated that the measure of the social conscience of a nation lies in its treatment of its aging and dependant population".

While veterans remind us of so many valuable and painfully learned lessons, they must never be regarded as relics. We must ensure that they receive every benefit that Canadian society can provide to them. We must also be willing and able to provide support to a new generation of Canadian veterans should conflict arise in the Persian Gulf.

All Canadians hope fervently that the crisis will be resolved peacefully. We cannot let our hopes blind us. We must be prepared for any development and we must be ready to support all of our veterans, both present and future. In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I want to say that I am very pleased that the Minister of Veterans Affairs has agreed to establish the study group to deal with various issues, some of which I have discussed.

• (1610)

As the official opposition critic for veterans affairs, I would hope to participate in this group. I look forward to working with the government and veterans to try to resolve the urgent matters before us.

I know that our goal should be a common one, to make the lives of Canadian veterans as healthy and as comfortable and as dignified as we possibly can. It is the least we can give to those who have given so much. We live as a free people, not by chance but because when that freedom was threatened, the men and the women of the army, the navy, the air force, and the merchant marine